

We are the sheep Jesus holds in his hand

**Homily by Most Rev. Samuel J. Aquila, D.D.
Bishop of Fargo
(Given at Confirmation Masses throughout the Diocese of Fargo
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Editor's note: This homily is directed at children, most of whom are in the third grade, as they participate in the Mass during which they will receive the sacraments of confirmation and first Eucharist. Imagine all of the hands raising as Bishop Aquila asks these questions. Some of his interaction with the children is retained in the editing to help readers "listen" to these words with a child-like faith.

Are all of you ready? Yes. Are you excited? Yes. Okay, have a seat.

In our first reading for this afternoon, we hear the Acts of the Apostles. It's after the death and resurrection of Jesus and Paul is preaching about...who? Who was Paul preaching about? Who did Paul want people to understand? The Lord God. Right. The Lord God. Jesus. He wanted them to understand more about Jesus. And were all the people happy that he was preaching about Jesus? No, there were some people who were upset and some people who didn't like that and they began to persecute him, but he continued to preach. Then they threw him out of the city. They said "enough of this" and they tossed him out.

Who was with Paul besides Barnabas and the Lord? Who were we told when he leaves, "he left with joy in the..." Who are you going to receive? The Holy Spirit. Very good. You had your listening ears on. The Holy Spirit. They left in the joy of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit is the one who gave him the courage to preach about Jesus.

Now in the second reading we see the vision of John in Revelation. He sees people from every nation and land and race, and what does that teach us about Jesus and Jesus' message? What does that teach us, if people from every race and country and land are there? Is Jesus' message just for the Jewish people? No, Jesus' message is for everyone. Jesus' message is for everyone, for every human person. The message of Jesus is one that gives to us the gift of eternal life and the forgiveness of our sins.

We hear that in the Gospel. It was a very, very brief Gospel. In the Gospel Jesus speaks about how he knows his sheep and his sheep know him and he tells us something very important. He says that he holds his sheep in his hand and no one can take them away from him. The Father holds the sheep, too, in his hand and no one can ever take them away. Who were the sheep? We are. Right. You are! Very good. The Father and Jesus hold us in their hands and no one, no one can take us out of their hands. So that gives us great confidence.

However, there's one person who can take us out of Jesus' hand, and who is that? What happens when you hold onto an animal or something really tightly and they don't want to stay with you? What do they do? They slip away. The only way you can get out of the hand of Jesus or of the Father is if you don't want to stay in that hand. Jesus is always holding you and so is the Father, but when you commit sin you're kind of squirming around like that little puppy who doesn't want to be held even though you want to hold onto him.

How many of you have dogs and have had that happen? A lot of you. You know what it's like. When they don't want to stay they slip right out. That is true with us, too. We have to want to stay with Jesus. We have to want to be with Jesus and with the Father. The promise that Jesus gives

to us is eternal life, that we will live with him forever, each and every one of us. Is there anyone else who can give you the forgiveness of your sins or eternal life? No. Can your Game Boys give you eternal life? No. Can your computers forgive your sins? No. Can soccer or hockey or wrestling bring you salvation? No. None of them. Can your televisions forgive your sins? No to all of that. But look at how much time we spend with all of those things.

And all of the older people here, listen to this. A few weeks ago I came across a statistic that floored me. Children, you listen, too. When a person reaches the age of 75, he or she has spent 14 years of his or her life watching television. Yes, it's more years than you children have been alive! And four of those 14 years are spent watching commercials. What does that say about us? A few days after reading that I was praying in my chapel and the statistic came to me again and I thought to myself, "How much time does a person spend by the time he or she reaches 75 in church? There are 52 Sundays a year, say an hour a Sunday, and even then people complain about it if it's an hour long or a little bit longer -- unless you're with the Bishop because you always know it's going to be an hour and a half! So, I said to myself, I'll be really generous and give a hundred and four hours. I will double it. Then I began to do the math in my head. By the time a person reaches the age of 75, he or she, if they have been going to church two hours a week, may have spent a little bit more than one year of their life with the sacraments and the liturgy and Mass. What does that say about us? Who is truly forming our hearts and our minds, especially the hearts and minds of young people?

Today as you receive the sacrament of confirmation, your baptism is going to be sealed and completed and you're going to receive who? The Holy Spirit. Right. And you're going to receive what with the Holy Spirit? What are you going to receive? Yes. Jesus will be there with you, but what else are you going to receive? The seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. What are those gifts? Who can name one of the gifts of the Spirit? Wisdom. Wisdom is that gift that God gives us so that we choose his ways and thoughts. How many of you children have had the experience of your mom or dad telling you, "I think you should do it this way," and they tell you the way you should do it and then how many of you have ever said, "No, I'm going to do it my way." Yes, the hands go up. Then what happens when you do it your way? You get in trouble. What else happens? It turns out wrong sometimes. It turns out wrong and you get in trouble. The same is true with God. God has shown us the way in Jesus Christ and he gives us a gift of the Spirit so that we will have his ways and thoughts. When we do not follow those ways and thoughts, then things get messed up and we wonder why.

What's another gift of the Holy Spirit? Fortitude. Fortitude is that gift that we saw in our first reading -- courage. Is everybody going to like you because you believe in Jesus? No. Are they going to like you because you're Catholic? No. So it is that courage to live the faith. It is that courage to live your faith day in and day out and to speak the truth, even when the truth is difficult.

Another gift of the Holy Spirit? Understanding. Who do we want to understand? Right. We want to understand Jesus. We want to understand God and the teachings of the Church, the teachings of Jesus.

Another gift of the Holy Spirit? Piety. Piety is that gift of having reverence for God, putting God first.

Another gift? Fear of the Lord. Does God want you to be afraid of him? No. God holds you in his hand. Fear of the Lord reveals to us the greatness of our God, so that we are filled with awe and wonder at how much he loves us, and so that we understand that love is unconditional.

Another gift of the Holy Spirit? Knowledge. Knowledge is that gift that God gives to us to help us know who? Jesus. And who else? God the Father, Jesus his Son, and the Holy Spirit. Right. Knowledge is a very, very important gift. Did you children know your parents when you were first born? No. Do you know everything about your parents today? No. You're still learning about your

parents and your parents are still learning about you. Do you know everything there is to know about the Father, Son and Holy Spirit? No. Do your moms and dads? No. Do your grandparents? No. That knowledge can continue to grow. It can continue to deepen. Children, what happens when knowledge of another person grows? You get smarter. Yes. But what about in a relationship, when you grow to know someone better, what happens in that? It spreads. What else happens? What grows? You know more about them and what do you become? What do you become if you know somebody? You become familiar with them and you become friends with them. Right. As you come to know that person more, not only does the friendship grow, but also your love of that person grows.

One more gift? Counsel. Counsel is that gift that God gives to us that helps us to always choose what over what? To choose the right thing over the wrong thing. To choose the good over the bad. To choose Jesus over Satan. Right! To choose Jesus over Satan. Counsel is that gift of the Holy Spirit that God bestows on us so we will make the right decisions and the right choices. God also gives us that gift of counsel because God has a plan for each and every one of you. He may plan for some of you to be in the married state. He may plan for some of you young boys to be priests. He may plan for some of you young girls to be religious. God has a definite plan for you. So pray for that gift of counsel.

So, the seven gifts that you will be receiving today are knowledge, wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, fear of the Lord and piety. All seven of those gifts are yours for the rest of your life.

Once your baptism is completed with confirmation, there are two other sacraments that Jesus has given to us -- two other gifts that help us to remain faithful sons and daughters of God, that we can receive more than once. We can be baptized and confirmed only once, but these other two sacraments we can receive frequently. Who can tell me what those sacraments are? Who can name one of them for me? The Eucharist. Right. And confession, or reconciliation or penance.

You're going to receive your first Eucharist today. Baptism and confirmation point to the Eucharist. As you receive the Eucharist, who are you going to receive? Jesus. How are you going to receive Jesus? By getting the gift of his body and blood. Right. Jesus gives to us the gift of his body, blood, soul and divinity in the Eucharist. When we are in communion with Jesus, we are also in communion with the Father and the Holy Spirit. As Jesus teaches us in today's Gospel, he and the Father are one. They are always in union. They are two different persons but the one God. There are three persons in the one God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. When we receive Jesus, we also are united with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Who else are we united to? If all of you receive Holy Communion, who else are we, and your parents and everyone else united to? Each other. We are all united to each other because we receive the same Jesus. How often can we go to Mass? Whenever we want. Yes. And we are called to go to Mass when? Saturday or Sunday, right. That is so we stay in that relationship with the Lord.

Now, the sacrament of confession. It helps us to grow in holiness. Do you children ever commit sin? Yes. All the heads are shaking "yes". Do your moms and dads commit sin? Yes. Do grandmas and grandpas? Yes. Do priests and the bishop? Yes. We are all sinners. Every one of us is a sinner and if we truly want to grow in holiness it means that we should be going to confession at least once a month. We need to go to seek the Lord so that we can recognize our own sins and confess them, so that we always remain faithful sons and daughters of God.

I want to speak briefly to the parents of these young people. As all of you are aware, we are confirming the children at an earlier age. Certainly we can recognize, with the world in which we live, their need for the sacrament of confirmation and the gifts of the Spirit. They are exposed today to more temptations or dangers than any of us were exposed in our lifetime. All you have to do is read the headlines of the papers for the last 10 years and you can see things that we never knew about until we were maybe 10, 15, 20 years old. The gift of confirmation completes baptism. It seals their baptism and makes them fully sons and daughters of God. So confirmation is not a

sacrament of maturity. It is not a sacrament of me choosing God, but it is a gift that is bestowed. In his recent apostolic exhortation on the Eucharist, *Sacrament of Charity*, Pope Benedict XVI, encouraged the bishops of the world to reflect on the order of the sacraments of initiation to ensure that confirmation is always directed towards the Eucharist.

The stance of every Christian before God is one of receptivity, one of receiving the gifts that our God desires to bestow upon us. The Lord desires that your children have these gifts. Our work, our *only* work, is one of cooperation and receptivity, one of remaining in the hand of the Father and remaining in the hand of Jesus. The place where that is done best and taught best is in your homes where you form your children and live the faith, teaching them the importance of their faith. Your children are well aware that they do not know everything about God. They are very well aware, and honest about, the fact that you do not know everything about God and your faith, that all of us can continue to grow. That is the beauty of children. They are so honest and truthful and they know the truth in their hearts. You can see their excitement and enthusiasm. It teaches us what Jesus means when he says, "You must be like little children." It is that trust, that honesty, that receptivity, that confidence in God's love for us. The crisis of today is truly that crisis of failing to receive the love of God and believing in our hearts that we are truly beloved sons and daughters of God. That the Father is truly holding us in his hand, that Jesus is truly holding us in his hand. The crisis today is one of faith and one of receptivity to love. "Do you truly believe and receive in your heart the love of Father, Son and Holy Spirit each day as the beloved daughter and son of God?" Think about your response. If you did, our churches would be packed, not just on weekends but every day.

I want to speak especially to the fathers of these children. Another statistic that I heard recently is the importance of the roles of fathers and of fathers living their faith. It is not to diminish the role of the mother, because her role too is important. She is the one who gives us life. She is the one who also hands on the gift of faith. But when fathers are living their faith and practicing their faith, their children will more than likely practice their faith in adulthood. All of us know the special role of fathers and the authority of fathers. Fathers, you must teach your sons what it means to be men of integrity, what it means to be men of God, men of faith, what it means to be men who reverence women and respect women.

Children, how many of you have been fighting with your brothers and sisters? All the hands go up again. See how honest they are? And your mom gets really frustrated. How many of you have ever heard the words, "Wait till your dad gets home?" The hands go up! The role of the father! The role of fathers is critical. If you're remaining in bed or saying to your wife, "I have to work, you take the children to Mass", that communicates something tremendously to your children – that Mass is not important. You're saying, "It's not the first thing that I want to do on the weekend -- to give glory and adoration to the God who loves me eternally, who has given me the gift of life." Dads, don't be pansies when it comes to living the faith! Be men of faith! Fathers, I encourage you to live your faith. Husbands and wives, live your faith! The proper ordering of every family is first for the husband and wife to love God above all things, to know and receive the love of God in their hearts, to know, for the men, that you are beloved sons of God, to know, for the women, that you are beloved daughters of God. Then from that love of God and that experience of God flows the love to your wives and to your husbands. Then the love flows to your children. Then there will be healthy, holy and happy families. But the love of God must come first.

My deepest prayer for you, my children, is that you come to know and to receive the love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit more fully each day, so I'm going to teach you a little prayer that you can pray each day. I ask you to repeat it after me. It's a very, very simple prayer. I'll run through it once and then I'll have you repeat it after me. "Father, help me to know you and to receive your love for me today." Okay, repeat after me, "Father, help me to know you and receive your love for me today. Jesus, help me to know you and receive your love for me today. And, Holy Spirit, help me to know you and to receive your love for me today." God knows your name. He loves each one of you personally. Receive that love, because in receiving that love you will love others more and that will help you to reach where God wants all of you to be. Where does God want you all to

be? With him where? In heaven, right. With God in heaven. That is the goal of every one of us -- to reach heaven. If we love God and if we keep his commandments and if we receive his love then, he tells us, we will go to heaven. If we don't, then what does he tell us? What's the other option? Go ahead. Going to hell, right. Those are the only two options for eternal life -- either going to heaven or going to hell. We choose which one we want by how we live our lives and how we receive the love of God.

So may your love for the Father, Son and Holy Spirit continue to grow each day and, most especially, as you receive the sacraments of confirmation, the Eucharist and reconciliation. May you continue to grow in your knowledge and love of God until that day when you look upon Jesus face to face.